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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined the role of language in an economics classroom. The researcher became an undergraduate economics student for one semester and concluded that the language practices in that economics classroom were represented neither by the transmission model nor the process approach to writing. The most valuable part of this ethnographic study, for both the researcher and the teacher, was the understanding of how difficult it is for any ethnographer to comprehend the lens through which he or she reads a community and how much researcher and teacher appreciated the opportunity to exchange views and to vent their frustrations about teaching. The researcher learned that if writing instructors want colleagues across the disciplines to review the assumptions behind their views of writing and reading, teaching and learning, then the writing instructors will also have to be willing to examine their own assumptions about their field. (RS)

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# Examining Our Own Lenses: An Ethnographic Study of an Economics Classroom

I was invited become a student in an undergraduate economics class last spring to describe the language practices of this disciplinary community. I sought to become, to the best of my abilities, an economist, just as other students sought to become initiated within the discipline; I attended class, took notes, wrote papers, read texts. In addition, I interviewed students and instructor, wrote field notes, and kept a journal. I wanted to understand "what sorts of knowledge students and teacher construct[ed] and what role . . . they [saw] language playing in the construction of knowledge," as Parker and Goodkin ask in The Consequences of Writing (2). By narrating my experience of this classroom, I hoped I would help the instructor better understand the role of language in his classroom.

However, the difficulty we as writing instructors face when entering classrooms in other disciplines is assuming that the critical arguments by which we explore our own discipline hold

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true for language practices in every discipline. Neither the transmission model argued against by Toby Fulwiler in Teaching With Writing nor the suggestion by Elaine Maimon et al in Writing in the Arts and Sciences that writing in all disciplines "is not an entity but a process" (xiv) describes the language practices within the economics classroom I studied. Before we seek to administer writing across the curriculum programs, it would be prudent for us to examine our own "stories" concerning learning and teaching, reading and writing, as exemplified by the product vs. process debate. That argument, once fruitful for composition, might only serve to conceal our own theoretical assumptions when studying other disciplines.

My 400-level economics course in state and local government seemed at first to resemble many undergraduate classrooms in which the mode of learning fit Paulo Freire's banking model, emphasizing the transactional function of language in its product orientation. This mode of learning seemed to me to stand in sharp contrast to the process model of teaching exemplified by many writing workshops in which student participation is not only desirable but often a course requirement.

However, my hypothesis of product vs. process orientation did not account for students' praise of the course for allowing generous "discussion." Early in the semester I had asked a couple of students what they thought of this class, and when they told me how "great" they thought the discussions were, I could hardly believe it. They had barely spoken a word during any class period! How was I to account for the disjuncture between my perceptions of the class as primarily a passive enterprise and

the students' sense of participation?

What I discovered from my own efforts to enter the discourse of economics was that students listened actively to the instructor's lectures, the way one listens to a good story, projecting themselves into his talk. This mode of instruction might be best described as storytelling, with the instructor narrating how economics has been and is done historically, theoretically, and politically, in the arena of state and local government. He implicitly invites students to situate themselves as economists in the messy affair of political debate and the irrational world of human beings--an adventure fraught with peril for theoretically minded, rational thinkers like economists. Thus, students leave the classroom feeling as if they've been engaged in a conversation even though they may not have uttered a word.

One class session on capital budgeting exemplified this instructor's ability to engage student/listeners in his unfolding story of economics. This particular meeting occurred during the eighth week of a 15-week semester. By this time, the 25 students and the instructor have developed a friendly rapport which the instructor uses as a way to begin class. He announces that drafts of research term papers are due during the next class period, joking that he would extract grave penalties on those who do not comply. Once questions about the term paper are answered, the instructor stands up from his seat at the front table. As he walks toward the blackboard, papers shuffle and student/listener pens are poised. Listeners recognize that the

instructor's reach for chalk means it is time to listen carefully and record for future retelling the narrative at hand.

The narrator reminds listeners he is continuing the previous session's story, then proceeds to locate the day's story within the larger narrative of the discipline:

> What we talked about on last Wednesday was capital budgeting. One of the things you have encountered in your discussions in economics is the part that really has more to do with the capital side of this, and we know this best as cost analysis, although benefit-cost analysis is not exclusively for capital projects. It's where it came from in the 1930s when it was invented by--made operational by the Corps of Engineers, and it's been used more for capital projects than it has been for operating.

The narrator has accomplished two important tasks in his introduction. He has located his listeners within a familiar concept, cost analysis, and included them as economists ("we") in the discussions of cost analysis.

Now that he has oriented his listeners, the narrator tries to raise the eyebrows of his economists by stating, "If you ask how much of [states' budgets] [are] scrutinized, analyzed on the basis of rate of return, benefit cost, some kind of formal analysis, the answer is <u>almost none</u> (his emphasis)." He pauses to write on the board, a cue listeners respond to by inscribing their own set of notes. "Not really none," the narrator qualifies. "Almost none. OK?"

The narrator has generated some suspense in this assertion: listeners presumably will wonder why concepts they've been told are useful in the context of their disciplinary studies are, according to the narrator, "remarkably nonused and not very

useful" in budgeting decisions of state and local governments. The question remains, only now with some accusation, why isn't it used? As loyal economists such as the listeners know, that's a lot of money to be tossing around.

Now that the narrator has (hopefully) aroused the indignation of his loyal economists, he offers his theory. At moments like this, listeners might notice how bright those fluorescent overhead lights are, how stressful is the glare, especially when they're trying to decipher the narrator's inscrutable handwriting on the blackboard while concentrating on his voice as he proceeds to construct a critical point they'd better not miss, or they'll lose the story altogether. Maybe they have a question, or they're thinking about one, but to formulate and then ask it would risk losing a key development in what sounds like a pretty good story.

The point is made: "The process by which monies are made is much less an engineering concept than it is political. The focus of almost all of these decisions has to do with the conversations that people have about how the money should be allocated." The plot thickens because now economics has left the realm of the abstract and absolute and is now located in the uncertainty of human affairs. For the listeners, this is where the real story begins; when the story involves people, one never knows for certain where it will lead. The challenge for listeners is to imagine as the story unfolds where they stand in relation to this chaos, to discover ways to make sense out of the circus-arena of the political scene, to maneuver, under the protective guidance of the narrator, through the flotsam and jetsam of the

competitive machinery toward the goal of equitable budgeting.

The narrator retreats momentarily from his earlier position: "Now we might suppose that formal analysis could, in fact, improve the process." But no. "I have grave doubts that in fact it could." He writes more on the board, pausing--to register his listener's attention? To collect his next statement? Listeners can only speculate. Then he continues: "Formal analysis does not lend itself to the subtleties that are so important in making good decisions. It's been far too much emphasized in the academic literature for what it's worth."

Still, a question looms in the minds of listeners: what part can the loyal economist take in government budget-making?

After a brief discussion about the predictability of benefits and costs, an answer comes: "Given the extraordinary errors around both the quantifications and the predictability, we're probably just as well off having discussions, and competitive discussions, rather than try to do formal analysis."

Listeners' tensions subside momentarily, though everyone knows the story could not possibly be over yet. A listener might glance out the narrow windows to her right and glimpse a passer-by in the university courtyard, or shift position in his seat. She might even snatch a look at her fellow classmates to see if they are still taking notes as the narrator leaves the blackboard and steps around the table, stroking his beard. The story is headed into background exposition; the pens droop for a moment, then perk up when the narrator reaches for chalk.

After several minutes of explanation about the history of

competitive enterprise and public debate, loyal economists' hopes seem dashed and their loyalties frustrated. The narrator concludes: "You can't quantify [the budget], you can't predict it, so might as well let people have all the emotion that they have, screaming at each other, and all the craziness of a pitcher from Texas who says that women aren't supposed to be baseball umpires because they were made to stay in the kitchen."

It never occurs to listeners that their own classroom is devoid of screaming and emotion and craziness, because one can't pay attention to a good story unless one is attentive and quiet. They assume that in some ways it's more enjoyable to hear the narrator describe such "craziness" than to be a part of it. Still, the narrator has excluded them, the loyal economists, to such an extent that they're getting frustrated. Is economics really so much an ivory tower that it can't inform the budgeting process at all?

But the narrator once again appeals to the loyal economist: "Now unfortunately, in this kind of lecture we come out looking very neander--, anyway we're talking very dumb. Because obviously some formal analysis (he picks up the chalk and writes) can be used in the competitive-political discussion. And <u>is</u> used." He puts the chalk down.

The listener at this point may be totally confused about her place in this story; first she's told she doesn't belong, then she's told she can help, then she finds out it's doubtful, then, well, maybe there are a few things she can do. Naturally, the listener is suspicious at this point.

The narrator takes advantage of his listeners' confusion to

inject some political commentary as well as note historical changes: "We've come a long way from the days in the 1960's it was thought the entire defense department could be subjected to formal analysis and removed from political debate about what should be done." To some listeners, whose pens are resting on their scribbled notes, this constitutes one of numerous "digressions," as listeners refer to them, that the narrator takes throughout the semester's narratives. To others, the light bulb inside goes off--so that's where his problem with formal analysis comes from, and thus they regain some perspective on their status as loyal economists. In a backdoor attempt to arouse the moral indignation (and possibly mount a call to economics arms), the narrator continues, the implication that an Ideal economist injects his voice into the political debate just like everyone else, instead of as some ivory tower "number cruncher," as the narrator often describes himself. He concludes, "Formal analysis has only a very small role to play in budgeting and . . . the frustration of saying that is that's all an economist is capable of doing." Loyal economist listeners can rest a little easier knowing the narrator has named their frustration as his, too.

Of course, the story doesn't end here, though perhaps by now your experience of this mode of instruction is clear enough for you to consider another disjuncture I experienced as ethnographer. My perceptions again conflicted with students' over the written work we generated. To my surprise, what I would have considered plagiarism in my own classroom was not only common but expected

writing decorum in this classroom. For example, the first writing assignment asked students to "argue" with a position offered by one of the textbook authors:

> Argue the second part of Bahl (Financing State and Local Governments in the 1980s), pages 17 on. What is the role of subnational governments? Take a position--pro or con. No less than three pages. Write as much as you want but try to keep it short. Will be graded.
>
> Bahl's position is that distribution plays a more important part than stability or allocation. The quality of the paper will be the quality of the argument. I (the instructor) personally believe distribution plays the largest role.

I assumed that "argue" meant we were expected to engage in "critical, independent thinking," as Toby Fulwiler has proposed writing in the disciplines should promote (2). But since I felt I had no frame of reference from which to argue, I chose instead to base my argument upon the instructor's. Although I tried to cast my statements in my own language, I found myself shaping my text in accordance to the narrative form of political commentary used by the instructor. My paper began this way:

> As Bahl states, almost everyone in government agrees that at least some cities and regions are in need of extra financial assistance. The questions this issue raises are which places are needy and who will provide aid. . . Under the Reagan administration, the message as to who will provide this aid has been clear: states must take more responsibility for the welfare of their local governments, even though states complain they have reached their maximum taxing capacities.

After reading other students' texts, I discovered that not only did they take on the authorized arguments, but in many cases used the actual phrasing, syntax, and supporting evidence of the assigned text, usually without documentation. What to me seemed nothing short of plagiarism was to students and instructor a

necessary step towards initiation into the disciplinary discourse. Instead of working from within their own language to assimilate disciplinary knowledge as I had, students chose to "try on" the less familiar language and discourse conventions. Compare the following introductions to two student texts with an excerpt from the textbook:

> (Student #1) When we begin to talk about the role of subnational government, conventional thought states we talk of three functions. These are areas where the market has failed to provide these roles and the government has stepped in to fill these roles. Stabilization, which is maintaining full employment; distribution, maintaining a reasonable distribution of income; allocation, how to spend government funds; are addressed in different ways on the state and local level.
>
> (Student #2) The functions of government can be broken down into three areas of responsibility: allocation, stabilization, and distribution. Conventional thought holds that of these functions, only allocation can be properly handled by lower-level government due to the difficult task of coordinating the stabilization and distribution functions (Bahl, p. 17). However, each of these plays a vital role in the administrative structure of our nation, and therefore cannot be delegated solely to the federal government to perform.
>
> (Bahl, page 17) What is the place of state and local governments in the formulation and implementation of national economic and social policy? Conventional thought holds that of the three functions of public budget--stabilization, distribution, and allocation--only the last can be properly addressed by lower-level government.

I began to understand that student economists' arguments were drawn from a pool of received knowledge and shaped, to the best of their abilities, in accordance with authorized texts. In classical rhetoric, according to Knoblauch and Brannon in Rhetorical Traditions and the Teaching of Writing, discourse served a similar, ceremonial function; lines of argument were retrieved through topoi and rearranged in shapes that were

pleasing and persuasive to a given audience. Consequently, those students who wrote the best "stories" --in other words, whose texts most resembled the stories of initiated economists--were rewarded with the highest grades. As one student told me when I asked her if she learned anything from the writing assignments, the writing helped her "remember" what she'd read.

As the semester progressed, the instructor and I shared numerous conversations, revealing our mutual uncertainties over this strange and murky research, our hopes and frustrations as teachers, and our growing mutual respect. What eventually came to light as the most valuable part of this ethnography was the conversation we'd established and an understanding of how difficult is it for any ethnographer to comprehend the lens through which she "reads" a community. When I finally read a version of this paper to the instructor, I understood the power of ethnographic study and its potential usefulness in writing across the curriculum programs. The instructor's "shock of recognition," as he put it, both pleased and unsettled him. He heard, on one hand, his strengths as a "storyteller," and at the same time recognized how far removed he was from his fellow economists not only in terms of pedagogy but values. He went on to tell me how my presence that semester had caused him to reflect a great deal on his teaching, especially his teaching of writing. What he most appreciated, however, was the opportunity our interaction provided for teachers to exchange views, try out ideas, and vent frustrations about their teaching in a "safe" environment--a privilege almost unheard of on many, if not most, campuses.

From my perspective, I learned that if writing instructors want colleagues across the disciplines to review the assumptions behind their views of writing and reading, teaching and learning, we have to be willing to do the same. If we want other teachers to place their trust in us and enter our discipline with curiosity and interest, we should seek to become trusted collaborators with whom real dialogue is possible.

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